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Cambridge University Press, 2007, 303 pages

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- 1 In a would-be hard-boiled world where no act of violence, no harsh event or fact of life and, ultimately, no crude designation of these things seem to have been left behind by the magnifying slant of the media, a book meant to bring to the fore the repressed side of our linguistic approach to reality may appear as something of an oddity. It tends, however, to highlight how dubious this so-called daily exposure is, both in its underlying motivations and in its pragmatic impact.
- 2 Keith Allan and Kate Burridge's *Forbidden Words* deals with taboo in all senses of the word, ranging from its Tahitian origins to the euphemistic attitudes that it generates and the various shades of trouble stirred up by the use of "dysphemisms" in a particular social and interpersonal context. Divided into ten chapters, it begins with a detailed historical survey, probing into the roots of the word and into the notional content that it encapsulates. Then the authors embark on a long-run exploration of the diversity of mental attitudes and subsequent ways of handling language to refer to the unspeakable and/or the incorrect. Three sizeable and particularly well-documented chapters focus on the main areas where these two closely linked notions are at work in mind and language ("Sex and bodily effluvia", "Food and smell", "Disease, death and killing"). The final chapter, which is also the conclusion of the essay, offers a short synthesis of these

different approaches to linguistic censoring via a close examination of the whole gamut of the human brain's emotional responses to taboo words and situations.

- 3 The deft and subtle lexical choices made by the authors to carry out their sociolinguistic investigation rest on two main distinctions: first of all, a fine line is drawn (p. 24) between "censorship" (considered as an institutional practice) and "censoring" (referred to as an individual practice, momentary and, above all, context-dependent); then, the hypernym "X-phemisms" is coined (p. 29), encompassing the "cross-varietal synonyms" formed by a given set of words used across different language registers to point out to the same notion. This includes, of course, "euphemism" and "dysphemism", but also "orthophemism", a word which refers to all the expressions that stand halfway between these two extremes, conveying the speaker's more "neutral" approach. This initial three-fold categorization sets the stage for an abundant discussion in which the workings of intersubjectivity are given focal prominence, exemplified by various outlooks on political correctness and on the double-edged impact of certain modes of naming and labelling, aptly referred to as "the dysphemistic worm in the euphemistic bud" (p. 98).
- 4 The part devoted to "Culinary camouflage - gastronomic red herrings" is particularly tasty, bringing to light as it does an overall sanitized approach to death and to the lexical items that pertain both to dead animals and to the ways of turning them into food - language itself being envisaged as palatable material. The study of lexical items and metaphors used to name disease and bodily discomfort follows the same lines, showing how social and individual unease pervades linguistic behaviours, making medical speech an outstanding illustration of understatement ("mitotic disease" vs. cancer, p. 221). The authors linger most significantly on two contemporary scourges, cancer and AIDS, disclosing the mental path at work in medical labelling and the inner tensions that inhabit both speaker and co-speaker, lost between the euphemistic cure-all and the tremendous weight of the implicit. Accordingly, what is systematically emphasized throughout these chapters is the "euphemistic magic" (p. 183) which lies at the core of this mental process of getting to grips with the socially, emotionally or politically unacceptable.
- 5 Even though the thematic order chosen by the authors sometimes leaves room for a few minor redundancies, reading this book is indeed a stimulating and far-reaching experience. Both its post-modern bias which deliberately blurs all clearcut boundaries between the different areas of human experience and the overall simplicity of the language used throughout makes it fit for any reader eager to grasp the meaning of our timeless linguistic reservations and wanderings.

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